

LOVE IN THE MIDST OF RESEARCH: MY STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCE IN MEXICO

by RAQUEL PACHECO

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THE FORM OF THE THESIS SEEMS LIKE A bizarre tool for rendering the lives of the peoples of FDOMEZ, an organization in the Huasteca region of Mexico. The academic tools I carried with me on my first few trips to the Frente Democrático Oriental

de México Emiliano Zapata soon proved dull. There is almost nothing more anathema to a student of indigenous identity politics than hearing 600 indigenous peoples shouting “Por la liberación proletaria del campesino venceremos!” or singing “L’Internationale” in Spanish at 5 a.m. (Originally written in French, this song has been translated into many languages and is recognized as the anthem of international socialism.) This group challenged not only what I learned as an anthropology student, but also my very role as a student researcher.

Part of the problem was a scientific mindset that predisposed me to read about a place and struggle that I had never gotten to know in person and to interpret it using academic paradigms. Theodor Adorno approaches this matter in his analysis of Descartes’s *Discourse on Method*, a treatise that laid the groundwork for positivism and modern Western science. He critiques Descartes’s method for producing knowledge in the form of simplifying models that create the “illusion of a simple, basically logical world.” This tendency in scientific approaches encompasses most of what I have been taught since kindergarten.

As a graduate student, I was poised to stand very close to the pinnacle of that ivory tower, prepared to theorize on objects of study. Oftentimes I feel pushed to theorize in a way that is tied to the spirit of simplicity and logic. Does not the question “What is your argument?”—so basic to any conversation about theses—epitomize this tendency? In the praxis of both researching and writing, we are left to battle the thorny feelings that arise from trying to make coherent pictures out of the

vast and oftentimes cacophonous sets of stories, processes, personalities, settings, and emotions that are exchanged during research. How much of this do we leave out of our final accounts?

Upon rereading Adorno—who champions the form of the essay, with its open and wandering path of inquiry, as an alternative form of writing and thinking philosophy—I found that my interaction with the peoples of the Huasteca has meandered along like an essay. By that I mean that in the course of my journey I had to give up a preconceived endpoint and a predetermined set of criteria with which to approach my research question. My shifting relationship with the organization led me to substitute my conception of scientific research with a commitment to friendship and solidarity with FDOMEZ as the criteria driving my research.

When I carried out my first interviews, I made some people uncomfortable by asking them point blank what socialism, the platform of the organization, meant to them specifically as indigenous peoples. Having learned about certain kinds of identity politics, I assumed this indigenous group would have a ready answer because, of course, they all identify as indigenous and would have had to give that precise question some thought. However, many people responded with a puzzled look or, what is worse, an irritated expression. Some might have felt I was placing them in the “savage” category, and others might not have fathomed what being specifically Nahuatl had to do with being socialist. Initially, this was very disconcerting because it made me wonder whether my driving question—why socialism is the platform of an indigenous peasant organization in the age of identity politics—might be at some basic level misguided.

It was probably my third interview that embarrassed me the most. I had finished grilling the friendly president of the Unión de Mujeres

(the women's group within FDOMÉZ) and, satisfied after an hour of personal and political questions, I turned off my recorder and thanked her for her time. In Nahuatl, she spoke smilingly to a friend sitting next to her, and I knew something was wrong. She looked straight at me and in a measured tone said, "We're not done, I have some questions for you." It took me a few moments to recover from that sinking feeling of shame at not having given her an equal chance at interviewing me. Her questions made me realize that my presence and profession were not being taken for granted. I, too, had to reveal my history,

general demise of socialism as a utopian project post-1990. However, their time-tested antidotes of solidarity and collectivism are what made my association with the organization as a fellow human being possible. At the end of an interview with a veteran member of the organization, I addressed the friction I thought was caused by my perceived privileged position as a U.S.-grown, better-off mestiza researcher. After a reflective pause he said, "That may be the case, but you have the heart of a proletarian. Is that not why you have come from so far to the land of your parents?" This shocked me because I realized that all this time I was

of the community; I am Porfirio and Mari's daughter, a proletarian, a Mexican rather than just a Chicana, a died-again Christian who is no threat to their political Catholicism, and many other things I did not intend. Although I have yet to apply the spirit of the essay to the writing of my thesis, careful not to impose a simplified and logical model over this vivid experience, I look forward to writing and presenting it to them as more than just a researcher.

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political agenda, and even establish my own sense of humor in more depth than could be revealed in a cursory introduction.

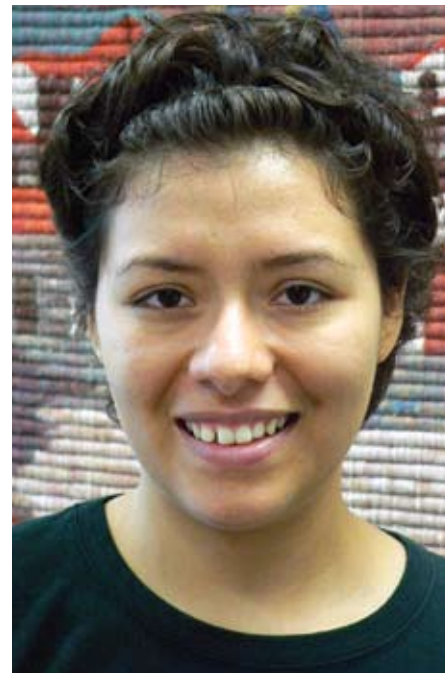
As a result of these experiences, I switched my method to asking broad questions while opening up myself for interrogation. I found that listening to what people had on their minds indirectly answered some of my questions and concerns and, what's more, it opened the Pandora's box to the flipside of that simple and logical world that positivist anxieties anticipate. In bits and pieces, the organization's problems, concerns, and anxieties, as well as its deep commitment to solidarity, equality, and collectivism began to surface, all of which previously had been completely off my radar.

Becoming an object of study myself reformulated my sense of purpose within the organization. Central to FDOMÉZ's experience are the collective feelings of solitude and isolation due to repression and the

being analyzed down to my bare emotions and origins.

A married couple I came to know found a way to transform my unusual status as a young foreign unmarried female who always arrived alone whether in the city or in rural communities. In one of our interviews in Mexico City, when the three of us were disclosing our ages, I commented that the husband was old enough to be my father. The next time I attended an FDOMÉZ event in a rural community, the couple and many other members of the organization began to teasingly and sometimes seriously identify me as the couple's daughter. In retrospect, I could venture a hypothesis that my initial comment had been an unconscious expression of a sense of budding closeness.

After much joking, washing clothes together, sitting down at meals, riding pre-dawn buses, and occasionally discussing politics, I have come to be more than a researcher in the eyes



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